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Public Address as the Basic Communication Course

William R. Upchurch

Public speaking has been at the heart of our discipline from its conceptual foundations in the ancient world to the founding of the National Council of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking in 1914. According to a longitudinal series of studies surveying the basic course in communication, the vast majority of such courses are either wholly or partially devoted to public speaking skill acquisition (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). Though the field has fractured into an interdisciplinary *mélange* over the last century, public speaking has held onto its primacy, at least as the visible face of most departments. In fact, its status may have increased over the past three decades in response to shifts in the mission and public understanding of institutes of higher learning (as part of communication across the curriculum (CXC) initiatives, partnerships with business and medical programs, and other vocational concerns). Unfortunately, this increased visibility and reach has come at the expense of losing focus on the historical impetus for learning such skills. A perfectly rational focus on economic uplift followed the broadening of university education to a more diverse student body, but this was accompanied by an unnecessary cultural shift away from the humanities and the public responsibilities of educated citizens. The skills of citizenship are the most important skills we can teach our stu-

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dents in a time of increasing economic disparity and political disengagement. To this end, I will suggest in this essay that reorienting the basic course toward a public address perspective should be an important part of our conversation over its content and character.

I am indebted to the many scholars who in the past few years have echoed this call in one form or another. Recollecting on the 50th anniversary of the Speech Teacher, Dance (2002) argued for reclaiming the connection between public speaking and “conceptual acuity,” or the co-developmental synergy between speech and thought. Hunt, Simonds, & Simonds (2009) called political engagement one of the three “21st century skills” we should be inculcating through the basic course (the other two being critical thinking and information literacy). Finally, and most significantly, I appreciate J. Michael Hogan’s excellent efforts to link public speaking to the ethics of public address and democratic deliberation. According to Hogan (2010), a public speaking basic course geared toward public address and all its attendant values must teach a form of public deliberation that has four characteristics. It must,

1. Be authentic and meaningful; that is, [it] must involve issues that genuinely matter to the participants, and the participants *must have reason to believe that they can make a difference*.
2. Include a diversity of views, testing those differing perspectives in the give-and-take of open debate. Deliberations among like-minded people...are not really deliberations at all.
3. [Teach citizens] how to deliberate; they not only need to learn about the issues to be discussed,

but also how to communicate effectively and ‘work through’ an issue.

4. Require at least some basic level of historical and civic literacy (Hogan, 2010, pp. 430-431).

That conception of public speaking as a basic course is far preferable to one whose aim is to teach theories that are not only disconnected from everyday practices through the mediation of the clinical trial but also reinforce our students’ withdrawal from the democratic public sphere by failing to teach them that their actions can have an impact on the world. But I am not here to argue for public speaking against social science or theory as the basic course. The debate over content has been fruitful and engaging, to be sure, but it always threatens to sweep objectives to the side as a site of meaningful dialogue. If we begin with the objective of teaching what I call the skills of citizenship then we can honor the unique history and legacy of our discipline while embracing new forms of research, new media technologies, and the shifting communication landscape of the 21st century.

THE SKILLS OF CITIZENSHIP

The practice of communication that occurs in the public speaking classroom has little value if it is not ethically transferred outside of it. The value of cognitive learning outcomes should be subordinate to behavioral and higher order affective outcomes, particularly those measuring affect toward behaviors recommended in the course and the likelihood of engaging in those behaviors.

The difference between a public speaking and a public address classroom is the assumed nature of those behaviors. As I said, teaching public speaking skills as vocational training to an increasingly diverse population of college students was a rational and well meaning enterprise. As the university got more diverse, jobs and individual economic improvement became paramount. It is time, however, for the pendulum to swing back toward civic participation and the roots of rhetoric in the basic course. As economic disparity grows in the U.S. and collective action becomes more imperative, we should be training speakers to participate politically rather than merely to get a better job. The Occupy encampments, the increasing social awareness demonstrated by online activist networks, and the slow erosion of the ideology of individualism point to an environment in which (particularly) young people feel a desire to organize and improve their world, but poll after poll shows that they are disconnected from the political process, feel little agency, and have little hope for a bright future, for themselves or their country. (Mark Leibovich's recent book *Our Town* suggests that the feeling is mutual—Washington is becoming increasingly disconnected from the rest of the country.) I would argue that our basic course has the historical impetus and content specialties to reverse the latter trends in service of the aforementioned goals.

Let us consider Occupy for a moment as an exemplar of both the opportunities and the challenges that face us as communication educators. I am unaware of any great speeches to emerge from the events, despite public speaking being one of their core components. While the protests (especially in Zuccotti Park) managed to get fa-

vorable media coverage at the beginning, and with it favorable opinion ratings amongst the American people, the lack of leadership, clearly articulated goals, and rhetorical touchstones soon saw both of these reversed. With nothing solid to grab hold of, both the viewers at home and the crowds in the streets dispersed. Occupy taught us many lessons about the uses of media for political organization in the 21st century, however. The organizers used social media such as email, Facebook, and blogs to spread information and influence. Twitter hashtags and Facebook memes were used to form a virtual participatory audience, which is fast becoming perhaps the most influential rhetorical environment in U.S. culture (the 2012 Obama campaign invested significant resources to the creation and exploitation of these environments). It is in looking beyond the podium and the boardroom that modern public address instructors will find the significant rhetorical spaces in which most of our students live and interact with others, and in doing so will allow us to demonstrate how communication concepts can be put to use right away to change their world for the better.

Occupy is also a stark example of the reality that training marginalized people in the public speaking tradition may provide them with some personal benefits but it does not automatically confer agency in the deliberative public sphere. Teaching public speaking as one-to-many persuasion embeds students in structures of power that may lead to frustration and alienation rather than empowerment. Students that feel disenfranchised from the political and social system will not suddenly gain a voice by mastering the mechanics of speaking publicly, but we can teach them how to use the

voice they have and to make use of the many channels available these days for addressing publics. This will require us to take into account all of the possibilities that communication technologies afford students, and also to pay attention to the ways that they prefer to be addressed. The assumption that our students communicate in public can no longer be taken for granted, but they can address publics even from the privacy of their home (or through a screen while seated at a coffee shop in which most people are keeping to themselves). This approach would reflect the reality that many of our students are or will be telecommuting, freelancing, or living at home well into their twenties, and may not be mingling in the informal social circles in which political power is formed, shaped, and consolidated. As a result, we should be teaching them how to access those circles rather than being distracted on the fringe by things like online petitions, radical partisanship, and sloganeering.

Encouraging Public Address

Our job in the basic course should be to marshal the historical insights of our discipline in service of contemporary public address. As guardians of the tradition of public deliberation, we should train our students in the ways of participatory democracy and encourage them to involve themselves in the machinations of power, whether by supporting political parties, rallying the public to a cause, or communicating interpersonally and through technology in a sustained and purposeful way. We should update our examples and understanding of fallacies and persuasion to include modern social technologies, which we hope connect the underrepresented

and marginalized but which we know can exacerbate the dark side of communication. We know that students use technology to communicate constantly, but there are increasing concerns that they are passive consumers of data rather than agents of creation and change. In fact, the kind of data collection and exploitation used by the Obama campaign during the 2012 election demonstrates some of the disturbing implications of this trend. We should teach students to recognize opportunities to address publics, but also to be aware of when they themselves are being addressed as part of a public and to what purposes that address is made.

Social sharing on Facebook, Twitter, and the like can replace deep deliberation with ephemera and glib stereotyping of positions and people. The fear is not that young people will cease being politically active, but that they will mistake certain aesthetic forms and everyday practices as meaningful participation, and that the back and forth of civil debate will be lost in a culture of sharing, re-tweeting, and “liking.” Perhaps this nonstop flow of identification behaviors demonstrates a limitation of a Burkean perspective on rhetoric, which, like those who argue for theory as the basic course, sometimes elides the ethical concerns of our field for the purely descriptive or cognitive. I wish to be clear that I am not arguing against cognitive outcomes, scientific inquiry, or even the introduction of theory in the basic course. My concern is more that we are being shaped by outside forces in ways that diminish our rich intellectual and professional history. I would prefer that our one and only interaction with many general education students showcases the accumulated knowledge and judgment of our field. No doubt business leaders wish us

to teach future employees how to better pitch their products, but such skills, if a student chooses to employ them, will come as a byproduct of their learning to articulate positions with higher stakes.

Finally, none of this would be useful if we do not teach our students how to practice it beyond the classroom. Service learning, a noble addition to the undergraduate education (and it should be a part of our graduate programs as well), has been shown to improve learning outcomes and student perceptions of course value (for a review of service learning in the communication discipline, see Warren & Sellnow, 2010). We should take this to heart in our basic course and give our students the opportunity to fully participate in society, often at an age at which they are expected to start voting but rarely given the tools to fully embrace their roles as public addresser and addressee. We should design assignments that link their coursework, and their bodies, to the world of politics that bustles along beside them unseen and unwelcoming but penetrable by a properly educated and motivated populace. To see our students consistently out in the world questioning, challenging, and addressing their fellow citizens will be to forcefully reclaim our heritage, mission, and greatest strengths from the vocational, administrative, and other forces that have become barriers to the development of a strong citizenry able to challenge the political and economic elites that threaten the core of our nation and the world at large.

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